



the rebellion of e. e. cummings

the poet's artful reaction against his father—and his alma mater

by adam kirsch

LITERARY CRITICS have found any number of ways to divide writers into opposing teams. Isaiah Berlin distinguished between “hedgehogs,” who know one big thing—Tolstoy, Dante—and “foxes,” who know many different things—Dostoevsky, Shakespeare. Philip Rahv taught a generation of readers to look at American literature as a combat between aesthetic “palefaces” like Henry James and vigorous “redskins” like Walt Whitman. But when it comes to the poetry of the twentieth century, perhaps the most useful distinction is the one between parents and children. Some poets present themselves as fathers or mothers—thoughtful, serious, eager to claim authority and accept responsibility. Others are determined to remain sons or daughters—playful, provocative, in love with games and experiments, and defiant of convention in language as in life.

The most notorious and beloved child in modern American poetry is E.E. Cummings. Even readers who seldom read poetry recognize the distinctive shape that a Cummings poem makes on the page: the blizzard of punctuation, the words running together or suddenly breaking part, the type spilling like a liquid from one line to the next:

one

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one

Cummings was not the first poet to use a typewriter, but as this poem shows, he was the first to take advantage of its power to control the exact spacing and shape of every line, and thus to make a poem’s visual appearance as important as its musical rhythms. What looks like a thin trickle of letters becomes, to a reader who has learned Cummings’s tricks, a picture in print: the snowflake “alighting” in a twirl, the severe vertical of the “grave-stone.” This playful tinkering with language is the most obvious and appealing sign of Cummings’s originality; as he once wrote, it is “such minutiae as commas and small i’s, in which...my Firstness thrives.”

But “Firstness” was not just a quality of Cummings’s style.

Opposite page: Undated painting of Cummings as a child by Charles Sydney Hopkinson

With the rebellious enthusiasm of a true poetic “son,” he elevated it to a moral and even a cosmic principle: his poems are constantly exhorting us to be original, independent, self-reliant. And he is scornful of everyone who takes refuge in received ideas and conventional standards—all the cumbersome traditions that parents pass on to their children. This is the constantly repeated message of his poetry:

i mean that the blond absence of any program
except last and always and first to live
makes unimportant what i and you believe;
not for philosophy does this rose give a damn...

“So far as I am concerned,” Cummings once declared, “poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality....Nobody else can be alive for you; nor can you be alive for anybody else.”

Yet this declaration of independence was issued, paradoxically, in the most grandly institutional of settings: from the stage of Sanders Theatre, in one of the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures that Cummings delivered in 1952 and 1953. To compound the irony, this was the very same stage from which Cummings gave a Commencement address at his Harvard graduation in 1915—an address that praised “The New Art” in terms calculated to scandalize an audience of proper Bostonians. Throughout his life, Harvard was an inescapable presence in Cummings’s moral universe: a place where conventions were imposed and where they could be fought against, a place endowed by the fathers but populated by the sons. To understand Cummings’s achievement, and the limits of that achievement, Harvard is the best place to start.

The full scope of the University’s role in Cummings’s life can be fully appreciated only now, thanks to a new biography of the poet by Christopher Sawyer-Laucanno. *E.E. Cummings: A Biography* is a definitive account of the poet’s turbulent life, a 600-page saga that includes some of the most colorful personalities of the Modernist period: Hart Crane and Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore and John Dos Passos. Cummings, born in 1894, was part of the generation that returned from World War I ready to demolish Victorian illusions and experiment with all kinds of liberation, sexual and social as well as literary. As he told his Sanders Theatre audience in the 1950s, he belonged to “what some wit once nicknamed a ‘lost generation,’” whose defining characteristic was a joyful, almost nihilistic embrace of risk. “I don’t think we enjoyed courting disaster,” Cummings recalled; “I do feel we liked being born.”

Cummings may have resisted the journalistic label of the “lost generation,” but his life helped to define its now-mythic itinerary. He was thoroughly disaffected by his wartime experiences, which he described in his autobiographical novel, *The Enormous Room*. He was glad to escape the regimentation of army life for the artists’ playground of Greenwich Village, where he threw himself into writing, painting, and sexual adventure. (Cummings would run through two marriages and many love affairs before settling down with the former model Marion Morehouse, his companion for the last 30 years of his life.) Like so many of his fellow Modernists—Edmund Wilson, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald—he made the pilgrimage to Paris in the 1920s, finding it a liberation and a revelation: “an actual marriage of material with immaterial things...an immediate recon-

cing of spirit and flesh, forever and now, heaven and earth.”

For the rest of his life, Cummings would reside in Greenwich Village—his apartment at 4 Patchin Place became one of the most famous literary addresses in America—and make regular visits to Paris. And as time passed, his odd-looking poetry, which first appeared in little magazines and ephemeral editions, won an ever-larger readership. It turned out that Cummings’s rebellion against social and sexual convention, far from being a lonely fight, brought him exactly in sync with the national mood. His rejection of sexual puritanism, his insistence on the freedom of the individual to think and explore and create, resonated perfectly with the increasing permissiveness of American culture. One might say that Cummings was just a few years ahead of his generation, attacking old values and institutions that were on the verge of surrender. By the time he died, in 1962,

neighbour, dwelling (at a decent distance) behind us, was Roland Thaxter, primarily the father of my loveliest playmate and ultimately the professor of cryptogamic botany. To our right, on Irving Street, occurred professors James and Royce and Warren; to our left, on Scott Street, transpired professor of economics Taussig.”

And Estlin, as he was known all his life, was the son of Edward Cummings, a member of the University’s fledgling de-
Counterclockwise from below, left: Cummings in a hammock with his father and sister, Elizabeth; his 1915 Harvard graduation photograph; Private Cummings at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, 1918.



he had become perhaps the most beloved and widely read of American Modernist poets. His popularity, like that of his contemporary Edna St. Vincent Millay, owed a great deal to his ability to capture the Bohemian mystique of the Village and the Left Bank, where literary and sexual experimentation seemed to go hand in hand:

i like my body when it is with your
body. It is so quite new a thing.
Muscles better and nerves more.
i like your body. i like what it does,
i like its hows....

THE READERS WHO DELIGHTED in such poems might have been surprised to learn that, in fact, Edward Estlin Cummings came from the most respectable quarter of Cambridge, Massachusetts. His childhood home was at 104 Irving Street, just a few blocks from where the Science Center now stands. He grew up surrounded by Harvard, and his first playmates were professors’ children. As he recalled in his Norton lectures: “Our nearest

partment of sociology. Genealogy, even more than geography, put Harvard at the center of the young poet’s mental and emotional life. As he grew up, his feelings about the world of Harvard and Cambridge were always informed by his strong, conflicting responses to his father, and vice versa. And it is no exaggeration to say that having a father like Edward Cummings—physically strong and spiritually intrepid, a dominant presence in his home and his city—helped to make E.E. Cummings one of the eternally rebellious “sons” of modern American poetry.



Cummings's rebellion against social and sexual convention, far from being a lonely fight, brought him exactly in sync with the national mood.

While Edward Cummings's family had been in Massachusetts since the 1630s, he was hardly a Boston Brahmin. He put himself through high school working as a carpenter and was the first member of his family to attend college. But once he arrived at Harvard, in 1879, he immediately felt at home—so much so that, with a few interruptions, he stayed there for the next 21 years. After graduating *magna cum laude* in 1883, he briefly attended the law school, then switched to the divinity school. After earning a master's degree, he went on to study sociology at the graduate school of arts and sciences, where he was a protégé of the great philosopher and psychologist William James. It was James

Edward Cummings's decision to join divinity with sociology was perfectly in tune with his Unitarianism, a faith that emphasized good works and philanthropy over doctrine and dogma. The same spirit reigned at Harvard: in 1888, Edward Cummings was awarded the University's first Robert Treat Paine Fellowship, a grant of \$600 "to study ethical problems of society and the efforts...to ameliorate the lot of the masses of mankind." This sounds at least as much like a religious calling as a secular science. Indeed, according to Sawyer-Laucanno, Cummings had been disappointed with the Harvard Divinity School precisely because "he found that his interest in ministering to the poor and



Clockwise from left: Self-portrait, circa 1920; Cummings's sketch of his friend Scofield Thayer '15, done at the time Cummings was having an affair with Thayer's wife, Elaine; Cummings's third and last wife, model and occasional actress Marion Morehouse, in the 1930s; photograph of Cummings in the 1930s by his lifelong friend, J. Sibley Watson '15; Cummings's voluptuous sketch of Elaine Thayer, who became the poet's first wife.

who introduced Edward to his wife-to-be, Rebecca Clarke, the granddaughter of a prominent Boston politician; they were married in 1891, the same year Edward joined the Harvard faculty. He would teach at the University for the next nine years, and would live on Irving Street, in Harvard's penumbra, for the rest of his life.

oppressed did not fit particularly well with the school's program that emphasized theology and pulpit studies over social issues."

So it made sense that, in 1900, Edward Cummings would finally leave Harvard in order to become the minister of a church famous for its commitment to "social issues." He was asked to take over the pulpit of Boston's South Congregational Church from Edward Everett Hale, one of the most famous philanthropists in America, who had turned his church into a center for activism. Whether as professor or as minister, Edward Cummings represented the best of nineteenth-century Unitarian Boston in general, and of Harvard in particular: its high moral principles, its noblesse oblige, and its confident liberalism.

To be the son of such a man, however, was not easy. One of the most revealing sections of Sawyer-Laucanno's biography deals with Cummings's youthful ambivalence toward his father, draw-

He blamed his repression on what he called
“my New England downbringing....”



Self-portrait by Cummings, circa 1930

ing on notes that Cummings wrote decades later. In those recollections, the adult poet remembers how overwhelming his father's example seemed, both morally and physically: “My father was a walking Platonic triad—the good, the true, the beautiful.” And the son was desperate to live up to his father's expectations. There even seems to be a hint of this in a diary entry that his mother, Rebecca, wrote when he was just a few days old: “Boy circumcised by Dr. Hildreth—Bore it very well—Cried lustily till Edward spoke to him telling him to bear it bravely. [T]hen the boy actually stopped crying.”

Whether this was coincidence or precocious obedience, Cummings's awe of his father continued to be a theme of his childhood. In one late-life memoir, he recalled an episode when “I was given a new sled, and went out with my nurse to coast—the sled, going fast, hit something and threw me off, and I cried: I begged

the nurse not to tell my father...I was always afraid of my father.” And inevitably, the desire to please his father colored Estlin's feelings about Harvard, where his father and all his neighbors taught, and which he was destined to attend. “As a baby,” he told the audience at his Norton lectures, “I sported a white sweater; on which my mother had embroidered a red H, for Harvard.” On his third birthday, in 1897, his mother noted in her diary Estlin's fondness for the John Harvard statue: “He is very fond of John Harvard and says ‘when I get a ‘tittle bigger Mullah, I’m going to be a big college boy and go to college with Fader.’”

That is just what he did—though by the time Cummings entered the College, in 1911, his father had long since left the faculty. The precocious 16-year-old freshman attended classes while living at home; not until he was a senior did he take a room in the Yard, in Thayer Hall. Still under his father's watchful eye, Estlin seemed to be following faithfully in Edward's footsteps. Like his father, Estlin graduated *magna cum laude*, and

like his father, he stayed on to earn a master's degree.

But unlike Edward, Estlin was no earnest student. He was known, rather, as one of the College's leading aesthetes, a connoisseur of avant-garde painting, music, and literature. He spent his time debating the work of Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell at the Harvard Poetry Society and helping to put together a literary magazine, the *Harvard Monthly*. The masthead of the *Monthly* boasted some names that would become famous in the 1920s: Cummings's fellow editors included the novelist John Dos Passos, the critic Gilbert Seldes, and the poet Robert Hillyer. Other editors, like the wealthy Scofield Thayer and J. Sibley Watson, would remain Cummings's friends and patrons throughout his life—"the truest friends," Cummings declared, "any man will ever enjoy." They were drawn together by their enthusiasm for the most radical trends in modern art and their disdain for their more conventional classmates at the *Advocate*. Sawyer-Laucanno quotes Malcolm Cowley, who would become famous as a chronicler of the "lost generation":

[T]he *Monthly* and the *Advocate*...looked down on each other—or to be accurate, they nodded to each other coldly from the facing doors of their respective sanctums on the dusty third floor of the Harvard Union. The *Monthlies* thought that the board of the *Advocate*...was composed of journalists, clubmen, athletes and disciples of Teddy Roosevelt, a former editor, and not a man of letters among them. The *Advocates* suspected that the *Monthlies* were aesthetes (as indeed most of them came to be called), scruffy poets, socialists, pacifists or worse.

Cowley's amused recollection sheds an indirect but significant light on Cummings's life and work. For just as Cummings and his friends made war on the College's philistinism from their office inside the Union, so Cummings's lifelong rebellion against the world of Harvard and Cambridge was decidedly a revolt from within, a matter of family rivalry rather than genuine rejection. It is important to keep this in mind whenever Cummings's poetry mocks Cambridge as the epitome of stifling respectability:

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls
are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds
(also, with the church's protestant blessings
daughters, unscented shapeless spirited)
they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead,
are invariably interested in so many things—
at the present writing one still finds
delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?
perhaps. While permanent faces coyly bandy

scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D
....the Cambridge ladies do not care, above
Cambridge if sometimes in its box of
sky lavender and cornerless, the
moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy

This is one of Cummings's best-known poems, and with good reason: it is a wonderful tirade, each detail chosen for its sarcastic bite: the souls that come already "furnished" with ideas and "comfortable" assumptions, residing in passionless, "unscented" bodies. And it reflected Cummings's deeply felt resistance to what he perceived as Cambridge's lifelessness. This is made clear in a letter the poet wrote to his younger sister in 1922, when she was struggling to leave the family home and move to New York:

NOTHING IS SO DIFFICULT AS TO BE ALIVE!!!! which
is the ONLY THING WHICH YOU CANNOT LEARN
ever, from anyone, anywhere: it must come out of you; and it
never can, until you have KNOCKED DOWN AND CARRIED OUT
all the teachable swill of Cambridge etc.

The physical dimension of "being alive" was as important in Cummings's rebellion against Cambridge as the mental and spiritual. Outwardly, Cummings was a well-behaved young man; according to Malcolm Cowley, "he was intensely shy and private in the Cambridge fashion." Yet as Sawyer-Laucanno reveals, this shyness concealed a strong sexual appetite, which Cummings both longed and feared to indulge. He blamed his repression on what he called "my New England downbringing," which "tried its best to make [me believe] that 'virtue' and *volupté* are opposites." And his father, the pastor, was the living symbol of that sexual Puritanism. "I led a double life," Cummings recalled, "getting drunk and feeling up girls but lying about this to my Father and taking his money all the time." More generally, he wrote, "FEAR & SEX go together in my life. With sex I associate, also, GUILTINESS."

It was only in his senior year, when he finally moved out of the Irving Street house, that Cummings had the opportunity and the audacity to overcome that guiltiness. As an adult, Cummings would become an emblem of the sexually liberated Twenties. His poetry has a sexual frankness, a delighted naughtiness that still makes it very popular with adolescent readers:

may i feel said he
(i'll squeal said she
just once said he)
it's fun said she....

(let's go said he
not too far said she
what's too far said he
where you are said she)

But in order to achieve that kind of freedom, some confrontation with his "downbringing," and with his father, was necessary—and Harvard offered the perfect staging ground. Cummings and his friends loved to explore the bars and brothels of Boston. He took advantage of his newfound freedom, as he later recalled, to "roam that surrounding world *sans peur*, if not *sans reproche*." It was on one of these expeditions, with his classmate "Tex" Wilson, that Cummings parked his father's car in front of a prostitute's apartment, only to emerge to find it (please turn to page 98)

are now, and would be if gay marriage were allowed, a tiny, tiny minority of all enrollees. Finally, Reiff has chosen to ignore the fact that most small plans exclude pre-existing conditions for new enrollees, so his assumption that a small plan might be required to "accept whatever sick person a gay person might marry" is nothing short of venal.

Reiff states that there is no reason same-sex partners should get Federal Code benefits since they cannot have children and both partners can work. Overlooking the fact that one million children in this country are being raised in gay households, is he suggesting that any heterosexual union in which both partners work should not receive these benefits?

Reiff does hit an important note when he writes that "It is all about the money, honey." Yes, financial benefits are a very important part of equality, including but not limited to Social Security benefits, the spousal inheritance-tax exemption, Medicare payments, and pension benefits. But Reiff is wrong to imply that gay activists are somehow hiding this. On the contrary, it is a critical part of the package. Thus the question remains: because all of the thousands of pages of marriage law in this country speak to two people only, why shouldn't two people of the same gender be allowed equal treatment financially?

WALTER T. BURR '84
Los Angeles

HIGHWHEELERS AND FASHION

"HIGHWHEEL HARVARD," by David Herlihy (November-December 2004, page 60), reminded me of how Alfred Church Lane, A.B. 1883, Ph.D. '88, referred to highwheels as an example of the rapidity of changing fashions. He said that during his undergraduate years the men on highwheelers had looked so grand and sportsmanlike that the first time he saw someone riding a little safety-bicycle, he thought: "Doesn't that look utterly ridiculous!" "But," he added, "within no time at all, didn't the man on a highwheeler look like a monkey on a stick!"

URSULA B. MARVIN, Ph.D. '69
Cambridge

THE NANOSCIENTISTS' WORLD

"THINKING SMALL," by Jonathan Shaw (January-February, page 50), which de-

scribes the work of Federico Capasso and others, is something of a breakthrough for *Harvard Magazine*. It's not easy to make really advanced technology intelligible to your usual readers. However, as significant as Capasso's work has been, it is a real stretch to credit him with having been the first to have designed a new material.

His work is based (as best as I can recall) on the pioneering superlattice publications by Nobel prize winner Leo Esaki and his team at IBM Research, which included Webster Howard, a 1962 Harvard Ph.D. graduate in the Division of Engineering and Applied Physics. This work, which dates back to the 1970s, surely included the design and fabrication of new materials.

ROBERT MYERS '58, Ph.D. '64
New York City

Editor's note: "Materials design has a long history in several major industrial laboratories," says Venkatesh Narayanamurti, dean of Harvard's Division of Engineering and Applied Sciences, "but with the quantum cascade laser, Capasso took materials design to a new level. The QCL is a unipolar semiconductor laser and is recognized as both a unique invention and a materials tour de force. It goes well beyond the original work of Esaki and others on superlattices, which started in the 1960s and '70s."

FOOTBALL'S WINNING WAYS

YOUR ACCOUNT of the perfect Harvard football season ("A Perfect 10," by "Cheat," January-February, page 78), with an action shot of Ryan Fitzpatrick, brought joy to this longtime Harvard football fan. It is delightful to read of four victories in a row over Yale, nine in a row over Princeton, two undefeated seasons in the last four, 11 Ivy League titles since 1956, and so on.

To these happy statistics, let me add another. As a result of this season's seven league wins, Harvard now has a winning record against every other Ivy League football team since league play was formalized in 1956. The Harvard records in wins, losses, and ties against Ivy opponents are:

Brown:	32-17-0	Penn:	29-19-1
Columbia:	40-8-1	Princeton:	24-23-2
Cornell:	24-23-2	Yale:	25-23-1
Dartmouth:	25-22-2		

ROBERT B. SPINDLE '52
Denver

E.E. CUMMINGS (continued from page 53)

towed away. As Sawyer-Laucanno tells the story, the woman, "thinking she was doing a good deed...rung the Reverend at three in the morning to tell him his car had been seized by the Boston police."

This was a rude awakening in more senses than one. In the ensuing fight, Edward Cummings wailed to his errant son, "I thought I had given birth to a god." This seems like a peculiar bit of hyperbole coming from a minister. But even if Cummings was exaggerating his father's reaction in retrospect, it is true that Cummings senior and junior often thought about each other in quasi-blasphemous terms. In his novel *The Enormous Room*, which details his experiences in a French detainment camp during World War I, Cummings printed an introduction by his father, which turns the son into an unmistakably Christ-like figure:

He was lost by the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps. He was officially dead as a result of official misinformation. He was entombed by the French Government. It took the better part of three months to find him and bring him back to life with the help of powerful and willing friends on both sides of the Atlantic.

And if Estlin was God the Son, it was only natural for Edward to become God the Father. "My father," the poet recalled as an adult, "is the principal figure of my earliest remembered life; when he cradled me in his arms, i reposed in the bosom of God Himself; & when i rode on God's shoulder i was king of the world. His illimitable love was the axis of my being." It must have been difficult for this God to learn that his only son was, in fact, all too human.

But it was a necessary shock, and it didn't permanently fracture their relationship. To the end of his life, Cummings declared his profound respect for his father. Certainly any father would be proud to receive the kind of encomium Cummings delivered in one of his Norton lectures:

He was a New Hampshire man, 6 foot 2, a crack shot & a famous fly-fisherman & a first-rate sailor (his sloop was named *The Actress*) & a woodsman who could find his way through forests primeval without a compass & a canoeist who'd still-paddle you up to a deer without ruffling the surface of a pond & an

ornithologist & taxidermist & (when he gave up hunting) an expert photographer (the best I've ever seen) & an actor who portrayed Julius Caesar in Sanders Theatre & a painter (both in oils and watercolors) & a better carpenter than any professional & an architect who designed his own houses before building them & (when he liked) a plumber who just for the fun of it installed all his own waterworks....

IN HIS ATTITUDE toward his father and toward Harvard, then, Cummings demonstrated an ambivalence that would leave deep marks on his whole life and work. On the one hand, he cast off his inherited Cambridge earnestness, moralism, and Puritanism. Yet he did all this as a student in his father's university, careful never to rebel so openly that he would be cast out of the community that was his birthright. In fact, it can often seem that Cummings's rebellion is staged specifically for the benefit of his father and his father's world.

And the limits of Cummings's rebellion help to explain the limits of his modernity. Superficially, Cummings is the most radical of poets: no American poet of his generation so fractured the surfaces of poetry. But as the great critic Randall Jarrell wrote, "Even the poems' difficulties are of an undemanding, unaccusing sort—that of puzzles"; once the reader has gotten accustomed to Cummings's typographical fireworks, there is nothing in the substance of the poems, their ideas and feelings and views of the world, that is genuinely challenging.

In this, Cummings offers a sharp contrast with T.S. Eliot '10, A.M. '11, whose student years at Harvard nearly overlapped with Cummings's, and who came from a similar Unitarian background. (Coincidentally, Sawyer-Lauanno reveals, Cummings and Eliot acted together in a Cambridge Social Dramatic Club production in 1913.) Eliot's poetry offers a profound challenge to the secular optimism of American culture—above all, to the national reverence for individualism. That is why *The Waste Land* and Eliot's other great poems continue to be among the most provocative and influential in modern poetry. Cummings's poems, on the other hand, are what Jarrell called "the popular songs of American intellectuals," in the sense that they re-

peat to us our own most comfortable assumptions—about love, nature, and the supreme value of the individual.

In the least attractive of his poems, Cummings invites the reader into a mutual admiration society, urging us to feel superior to all the soulless mediocrities who can't share our delicacy of feeling. Cummings's poems and letters are filled with a truly adolescent sense of superiority, curdling at times into misanthropy:

Huge this collective pseudobeast
(sans either pain or joy)
does nothing except preexist
its hoi in its polloi...

Cummings's assurance of superiority, like his failure to genuinely disturb his readers, makes even his most adventurous work seem like the antics of a beloved child, certain that his transgressions will be forgiven. "As for me," he said in his Norton lectures, "I was welcomed as no son of any king and queen was ever welcomed. Here was my joyous fate and my supreme blessing." And he recognized that Harvard, too, welcomed him, even in his rebellion: "As regards my own self-finding, I have to thank first of all that institution whose initial I flaunted unknowingly during my very earliest days." No wonder Harvard invited him back, almost 40 years after he graduated, as a Norton Lecturer. He may have been a prodigal, but he was always its son. ▀

Contributing editor Adam Kirsch '97, book critic of the New York Sun, is the author of the forthcoming The Wounded Surgeon, a study of modern American poetry. Houghton Library houses the Cummings papers: the bulk of his manuscripts and drawings, and his incoming correspondence.

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